

## UNDER THE SACRED BO-TREE

**W**OULD the *mem sahib* like to hear why she should be careful not to harm a butterfly? *Ahi!* I will tell her if she wishes."

It was the East speaking to the West, and both were beautiful after their kind.

The East stood in the full blaze of an Indian sun, with the embroidered end of her crimson *sari* drawn over her head, and the rest of her single garment falling in graceful folds to the rings of gold and silver, clasped around her ankles. If the white dust encroached upon her bare feet, she carried her brow aloft in the pose of a classic goddess.

But there was more than pose in her of the East. The East stood thus by right of long inheritance, and it was not the thing of yesterday over which she claimed dominion. When she looked at the West out of eyes unfathomable, it was as one who had seen deep into the universal mystery.

Of the morning glory on the Roof of the World, of the hidden places of the sea where strange creatures work in darkness, yes, even of the Valley of the Shadow and whence it leadeth, perhaps she could tell.

As she spoke there hovered upon the corners of her lips and the lashes of her long, narrow, half-closed eyes, a smile; but whether of scorn or desire, of sadness or satisfaction, its subtlety would have left a painter helpless before his canvas.

In the veil with which her fingers played was symbolized the mystery of her Oriental nature.

Though she stood but a pace or two distant, her voice fell in soft cadences like an echo; the echo of strife and passion, and the whirlwinds rending the human earth in the far off ages.

Perhaps she had witnessed the path of Timur, it may be she had stood alone of her kindred when the Terror had swept over the land by night, and the memory of such things lingered with her through many reincarnations.

And the West. She sat a trim, white figure in the shade of a bo or pipul tree. Above her head the glossy heart-shaped leaves quivered and spun ceaselessly on their long tendrils, even in the still air; flashing and pattering together when any faint breeze stirred.

Never for a moment do the leaves of that tree rest, because under them Gautama proclaimed the mutability of all things human. At least so hath tradition.

And the West looked at the East with eyes full of resolve and confidence. For her was the future, not the past. No blood red hand of Timur, Mohammed of Ghor, or Nadir Shah stretched across her mental vision, and the recollection of plague and carnage was not in her being.

She was of the newest born among types of womanly beauty, and before her on Fifth Avenue the stranger is proud to uncover his head.

Her gaze was set eagerly forward, with hope instead of a caste mark on her brow.

Thus had these two come together, the East and the West, at the sacred bo-tree.

"Would the *mem sahib* like to hear?" the East repeated her question.

"Yes," the West smiled and nodded frankly. "I shall be glad to listen."

"Very well, *mem sahib*," began the East, "it was a long time ago that this thing happened. It was many years before the *Feringhee Sahibs* came to India, before Shah Jehan sat on the Peacock Throne, yes, in the days when only Hindu kings and princes reigned.

"In that age there was a queen ruling over her own state. She was a great queen, strong in mind and hand. Mounted on her elephant she had led her troops to victory, and tigers had fallen beneath her spear.

"Great were her renown and riches. In her palace were halls of marble adorned with precious stones, baths of silver in which fountains of perfumed water splashed, and cool pavilions set in gardens of delight.

"Yet this queen, O *mem sahib*, was not satisfied. Always her spirit went forth in quest of something, she knew not what. Choice fruit was brought to her from Kabul, and snow of the Himalayas for her sherbets, but in such things she took no pleasure. Even in her sleep she could not rest, her spirit wandering forth in search of that unknown something.

"And at that time, where the *mem sahib* now sits in the shade of the bo-tree, the Lord Gautama rested. After many wanderings and privations he had become Buddha the Enlightened. All things were revealed to him. He was of the air, the fire, and the water, and every living creature did him reverence."

The East raised her arm with a jingle of bangles and pointed upward.

"The *mem sahib* will see," she went on, "that the leaves of the bo-tree still tremble, because Gautama found shelter and knowledge under its branches. So

great a thing was this that happened under the bo-tree.

"And as the Lord Buddha rested, a butterfly came fluttering hither and thither in search of something. Neither the *mem sahib* nor I could have known what the butterfly sought, but before Buddha there were no secrets. In the butterfly he saw the restless spirit of the queen, and he knew the source of her unhappiness.

"So Buddha beckoned to the butterfly, and it came and clung to his finger. Then Buddha bent over and breathed upon the insect, changing its nature but not its form. He gave to the butterfly a new life, and blessing it, sent it back to the great queen.

"And lo! O *mem sahib*, when the great queen came out of the dark night, she found resting on her arm the fulfillment of that which her spirit sought. And she cried in her joy, 'O heart of my heart, life of my life, *Hai Babaji*, desire of my desire!'

"Does the *mem sahib* understand what the Lord Buddha sent on the butterfly's wing for the great queen's happiness? That is why one should never harm a butterfly, lest it be a new life blessed by the Lord Buddha, a child spirit searching for its protecting arm."

To be sure it was a mere legend, a fairy tale as some would call it. But yet—the figure of the Lord Buddha, sitting under the shimmering, trembling leaves of the bo-tree, to this day looms impressively across a vast continent. Moreover in this instance the West looked at the East and understood. Perhaps in the Great Desire the East and West had met, while separated in all else by a gulf of ages.